

## Wounded in action: Sergeant Billy, the goat in military service for Canada in the Great War

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Animals have had a special place in the hearts of people since prehistoric times and have been part of all aspects of the lives of their human companions, even to the point of following them into war (1,2). These range from Bucephalus, the well-known horse of Alexander the Great (1) and the "Dogs of Ireland", used for both hunting and warring (3), to the less well-known, such as the goose that helped to warn British troops in Quebec of the approach of the Canadian "patriots" during the rebellion of 1837 (1).

Many types of animals have been involved in war, not only the better known horses, dogs, and birds, but also bears and various ungulates, like cattle, antelopes, and goats (1,2,4). Most of the animals that went to war were used for transport, communications, search and rescue, and guard duty, but others acted as mascots for regiments (1,2,5). All were considered "good for the moral of the fighting men" (5). Some became well-known, like Winnie the bear (6), but others remained in relative obscurity or achieved only local or transient notoriety, lasting only as long as the memories of their former comrades. One such animal was the goat that went to war for Canada in the Great War.

Billy, who was much loved by his comrades, went to the front with the 5th Canadian Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (Figure 1). He was no ordinary goat! Copping, an ex-lieutenant in the 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion, described Billy as wearing a "scarlet" jacket emblazoned with the battalion's colors, the chevrons of a sergeant, and stripes "for wounds received and services rendered." As well, there were the ribbons of the Mons Star, the General Service Medal, and the Victory Medal (4). This paper describes Sergeant Billy's contributions to the 5th Canadian Battalion, the "Fighting Fifth".

Billy was recruited in Saskatchewan in 1914 when the men of the Fighting Fifth were bound by train from western Canada to Valcartier Camp in Quebec (7). As their train was going through Broadview, Saskatchewan, the men were given the gift of a goat for good luck by the Curwain family, who ran the jewellery store in Broadview.



**Figure 1.** Sergeant Billy with his Battalion in 1917. (Courtesy of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, from R-B7112).

The men managed to get the goat on board the S.S. Lapland and overseas to England, where they arrived in October 1914. They managed to keep him from being quarantined when they arrived and moved to Lark Hill Camp. Billy was smuggled to France in February 1915 by his "boys", who refused to leave him behind as ordered (4,8). Soon after he arrived at the front, Billy was caught nosing around the Orderly Room. The Battalion Nominal Roll was found to be missing, and Billy was placed under arrest for theft when chewed remnants of the roll were found in his billet. A second arrest within a month for a base charge on a superior officer put Billy into disfavor, and many were convinced he was a traitor and possibly a German spy (4). However, all was forgiven when he distinguished himself in later battles. At Neuve Chappelle in February 1915, Billy was given the rank of sergeant (7). After the second battle of Ypres, he was found in a shell crater standing guard over a Prussian guardsman, in spite of the fact that he was bleeding from a shrapnel wound.

He got trench foot at Hill 63 in December 1915, and was shell-shocked at Hill 70 in April 1917 during the battle for Vimy Ridge (8); problems also suffered by many of his human comrades. He was wounded twice by shrapnel at Festubert. He is also credited with saving three people's lives, getting more shrapnel wounds in his neck in the process (8,9), for which he received the Mons Star (10). During a time of "shelling," Sergeant Billy, possibly forewarned by his superior hearing, literally butted a sergeant and two others into a mud-filled trench just before a shell exploded where they had been standing. Billy was gassed at the second Battle of

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**Figure 2.** Sergeant Billy in full uniform with a soldier friend (Courtesy of the Broadview Museum).

Ypres and afterwards disappeared. The men much feared that he had fallen into the hands of the Bengal Lancers from India, who were reputed to have a taste for goat curry. However, he was found, safe and sound (8). Billy served most of his war years in France, but he also saw action in Belgium. He was at Festubert and Givenchy, as well as Dickebusch, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, and Passchendaele. Billy received his other medals, the General Service Medal and the Victory Medal (7), for having served well for four and a half years (Figures 2–4).

After the war, the men of the Fighting Fifth had a hard time getting Billy back to England, since their commanding officers wanted him left behind. They also found a way to get him back to Canada, but when he arrived there in April 1919, the immigration officers at



**Figure 3.** Sergeant Billy, dated Sept. 17, 1918. Back row: Lt. GA Wildig, Lt. F Chinoweth, Lt. TW Cogland, MC, Lt. A Rackham. Front row: Capt. WE Lloyd, Capt. ER Osler [killed in action]. We were unable to verify that this was Edward Revere Osler, killed in late August 1917, who was the son of Sir William Osler. The photographs of Revere Osler in Cushing's biography (11) of Sir William Osler, (W. O. was much involved with veterinary medicine in Canada in the 1870s and 1880s), bear a close physical resemblance to the soldier in Figure 3. However, we know at least one other "R" Osler, a first cousin of E. Revere Osler, was also at the front during the Great War (11). (Courtesy of the Broadview Museum)

first wouldn't let him enter the country. Billy's comrades somehow surmounted this obstacle too.

When the Fighting Fifth got home to western Canada, Billy led the parade. Many people were present for the event and Sergeant Billy had more attention paid to him than anyone else (12). After the homecoming parade, he was returned to the Curwain family (7).

Sad to say, Billy died soon after. His friends from the Fighting Fifth were responsible for having their dear goat mascot preserved (8). He was mounted by a taxidermist in all his fine trappings and now stands in the Broadview Historical Museum in Broadview, Saskatchewan, where he still wears the chevrons and gold braid on his robe, as befits a sergeant (journal cover). The blue robe, designed and sewn by the regimental tailor, Sergeant William Rae, has the Fifth Battalion's badge on it along with Billy's wound stripes and sergeant's chevrons (8).

After Billy was mounted, he was first placed in Saskatchewan's Museum of Natural History in Regina [the Saskatchewan Provincial Museum in Coppings's note (4)] and later moved to the Library of the Saskatchewan Legislative Buildings. Subsequently, he was moved to the Plains Historical Museum (now the Regina Plains Museum), where, being sadly moth-eaten, he was put into storage (8). In 1980, he was moved to the Broadview Historical Museum, where, in 1982, he was cleaned and restored by the Canadian Conservation Institute.

"Sergeant Billy" was an inspiration to his human comrades and was obviously dearly loved by them, since they went to such lengths to keep him with them during the war years. As a reminder of how terrible wars are, it is important that we remember, those who, like "Sergeant Billy" and "The Fighting Fifth", fought, many to be wounded or killed. Animals and veterinarians played an important role in the Great War. Lest we forget! (13).



**Figure 4.** Incidents in Sergeant Billy's career by Leonard Shields 1916 (10). (Courtesy of the Broadview Museum)

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